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GOAL ORIENTATION AND COMMITMENT TO WORKING OF MBA WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

GOAL ORIENTATION AND COMMITMENT TO WORKING OF MBA WOMEN

The goal orientation and commitment to working of 89 women beginning MBA studies was examined. Approximately 75 percent of the women have defined career goals. Presence or absence of goals was affected by work experience, prior graduate training, interruption of academic training, age, marital status, full versus part-time program status, and selected attitudes toward combining family and career. A large majority of the women evidence moderate to very high commitment but indicate a desire for less than full-time work during certain stages of the family life cycle. Level of commitment was related to age, marital status, academic interruption and program status.

GOAL ORIENTATION AND COMMITMENT TO WORKING OF MBA WOMEN

An axiom of the feminist movement has been the need for women to attain positions of power in our society. One stronghold of power which has been relatively inaccessible to women in the past has been top buisness management. Today women, in numbers never before equalled, are seeking the traditional entree to that bastion of power--the MBA degree.

Yet, in spite of their rapidly increasing numbers, little is known about these women. Most of our specific information comes from a study of women who registered for the Admissions Test for Graduate Study in Business in 1973 (1). It focused on background and attitudinal factors which influenced the choice of business as a career and the intention to enroll in MBA programs.

The data in this paper is drawn from a continuing study which has contacted women soon after their initial enrollment for MBA studies and will follow them through to the attainment of their degrees and into their initial pos-degree employment. The purpose of the study is to investigate the manner in which background factors and the experience of MBA study itself affect progress in both the academic program and in subsequent employment.

The 89 women who provided this data completed a mail questionnaire early in the fall semester of 1976. All were in their first semester of MBA work at one of three institutions in the Boston area--two private, one public; all coeducational; two urban, one suburban; all with both full and part-time MBA programs and all with at least 30 percent women in their MBA programs.

This paper will explore the goal orientation of these women as expressed by their short and longer-range job aspirations and their level of commitment

to full-time continuous business careers. These variables will be related to certain aspects of their background, experience and attitudes.

Respondent Profile

First it seems appropriate to describe this group of women. They range in age from 21 to 51 with a median age of 26. Fifty-eight percent are single, 35 percent are married and seven percent are divorced, separated or widowed.[1] In the single group 58 percent do expect to marry, 13 percent do not and 29 percent expressed uncertainty. Forty percent plan to have children, 23 percent do not and 37 percent are not sure.

Only half of those who are married have children, most of whom are under 12 years of age. All of the husbands had at least some college education and over 70 percent are employed in professional or semi-professional positions.

Forty-one percent of their mothers and 57 percent of their fathers have at least one college degree. In terms of parents' occupations nine percent of mothers and 29 percent of fathers are professionals, 25 percent of mothers and six percent of fathers are semi-professional, 17 percent of fathers are top business executives, three percent of mothers and 16 percent of fathers are middle managers, 16 percent of mothers and 20 percent of fathers are skilled workers, 39 percent of mothers are housewives, and four percent of mothers and nine percent of fathers are in other occupations.

Is this, then, an elitist group? They do appear to come from higher than average socio-economic backgrounds but not overwhelmingly so, especially considering that the majority of the respondents come from relatively expensive private institutions. More importantly, perhaps, the majority of them seem to be themselves opting for traditional families--marriage and children. Does this mean that they are less commited to business careers than would

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[1]All percentages may not add to 100 due to missing data.

be the case if traditional family structure were rejected? Before attempting to answer this question directly, a look at their employment and academic background may be helpful.

Thirty-seven percent had done previous graduate work--most in non-management disciplines, with 14 percent already having a Masters degree in another field. Forty-six percent expect to be part-time students, 35 percent will be full time and 17 percent will combine full and part-time study. A majority of these women did not enter MBA programs immediately after their undergraduate degrees were completed. Thirty-three percent reported entering an MBA program immediately, 15 percent reported less than one year elapsing, 29 percent between one and three years and 30 percent four or more years. The reason given by the majority for this interruption was employment.

Only three percent did not report any employment history. Most reported several previous jobs spanning a wide variety of occupations from professional to skilled trades with the expected heavy concentrations in staff and secretarial/clerical jobs.

Goal Orientation

Three dependent variables were used as measures of goal orientation--the specific job expected upon completion of the MBA, the job desired at that time and the job desired at age 40. Being able to name a specific job was considered a valid measure of goal orientation since it implies a great deal about aspirations including such things as opportunities for advancement, line management versus staff duties, and expected salary level.

Approximately 75 percent of the women were able to provide a specific response for each variable and therefore were classified as having goals. This percentage did not change significantly across the three dependent variables indicating that if a respondent had short range employment goals, she was very likely to have longer-term goals also.

This was also borne out by the fact that precisely the same pattern emerged in looking for relationships[2] between the presence or absence of goals and independent variables, although relationships between the jobs desired at graduation and at age 40 and other variables were less significant than for the job expected upon graduation. Women 25 years and older were more likely to have specific employment goals than younger women. Married women were also more likely to have specific goals than unmarried, which is not surprising since these two variables are themselves related.

In terms of their academic experience and plans, part-time students are more likely to have employment goals. Many of these women expect to advance with their current employer as a result of obtaining an MBA degree. The same is true of the finding that women who have done previous graduate work are more likely to have specific goals. Many of these women wish to move from staff positions or other traditional women's occupations into positions with administrative responsibility. Those who decided on business careers more than four years before beginning graduate study and those who had interrupted their academic career for that same length of time were more likely to have specific goals. All of these findings point to the fact that women who have had significant exposure to the world of work have developed a goal-oriented approach toward their own business careers.

In terms of types of jobs previously or currently held, those who reported professional or semi-professional positions were more likely to be goal oriented. The other type of occupation which related to goal-orientation is secretarial or clerical positions. This may be more reasonable than it seems at first since these women have also been exposed to the activities

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[2]Relationships were measured by chi-square tests with the appropriate degrees of freedom using a significance level of .10 as a cut-off point.

of management although they have not participated in them directly as have many women in professional and semi-professional positions.

In terms of attitudinal data, the women who would not let the liklihood of extensive travel interfere with their taking a specific job and those who were certain about their attitudes toward employment during different stages of their family's life cycle were more goal oriented.

Commitment to Continuous Full-Time Employment

The subjects' commitment to working was measured by a series of five variables--their intention to work during the time when they have children less than six years old, their intention to work when all their children are over six years old (full-time, part-time, not at all); whether their employment plans would change if their husband's salary alone was adequate, whether they would accept a job that involved extensive travel (yes, no, not sure); and how certain they were of their responses to the first four variables (very, somewhat, not at all). Each variable was weighed equally in determining the commitment score.

While this set of variables seems to be a satisfactory measure of commitment for women who anticipate being part of a traditional family structure, it was irrelevant to women who do not anticipate either marriage or children. Since both from a practical and from an attitudinal standpoint these women should be career-oriented, they were assigned to the highest commitment category. These women with very high commitment made up 17 percent of the sample.

Another group, comprising eight percent of the sample, were considered to have very high commitment. These are primarily women who desire to work part time while they have pre-school children and evidence high levels of commitment on the other variables.

Another group--high commitment--was chiefly differentiated from the first group in the degree of certainty they held toward these variables. They also tended to be more desirous of having part-time employment while they had children at home. This group made up 27 percent of the sample.

A third group--moderate commitment--included 21 percent of the sample. This group is distinguished by stronger desires for part-time work and higher levels of uncertainty.

The final group--low commitment--was characterized by fairly low levels of commitment on all variables. This group made up 27 percent of the sample. Many were uncertain about their employment plans under various circumstances and others were firm in their intention not to work while they have children at home. None of the subjects fell into the lowest possible category.

The commitment variable was not significantly related to whether these women had short and longer-range career goals. It was related to whether the women are full or part-time students with more part-time students having low work committment. Women who had interrupted their academic careers for four or more years were more likely to have low commitment than were women who had been away from school for shorter periods of time. It was also related to marital status with more married women having low commitment. Women 25 years of age and older were more likely to have low commitment. The variables of age, marital status, interruption of academic careers and full versus part-time study are themselves very much interrelated. It is probable that they affect the commitment measure by causing a realistic appraisal of the difficulties of working and of being away from home frequently while children are young.

The findings concerning commitment to working raise both methodological and practical issues. In terms of methodology this measure, which was based

on previous work in this area (5), is a much better reflection of their current and anticipated family structure than of the importance of a meaningful career in their lives. It is also irrelevant to men since they less frequently make major concessions to family structure as they determine and follow career paths. A better measure of work commitment as well as attention to work orientation and motivation and work values should all be pursued in future research.

In practical terms it is reasonable to assume that most women are going to have to make a choice between full-time or no employment at all. Given current organizational structures it is very doubtful that the 40 percent of the women who are married or expect to be and who want to work part time while they have pre-school children and the 27 percent who want part-time work when their children are older will be able to find meaningful part-time situations. Frustration of this desire, whechever choice is made, may well lead to heightened tension within the family. It points once again to the need for organizations to become more flexible so that women may satisfactorily combine both career and family and so that society may benefit from the talents and learned skills of these women throughout their productive years.

Summary and Implications

This is a group of women who are relatively mature in both age and outlook, most of whom have embarked upon graduate education with specific short and longer-term career goals. Most of these women seem to have developed specific goals during past or current employment. It is probable that most of the others will develop specific goals while pursuing MBA degrees.

In spite of their well-defined plans to pursue careers in management and administration, the majority expect to marry and have children. This affects their intention to work during certain stages of the family life

cycle, but they do not appear to fit the pattern of other groups of working women who frequently enter and leave the labor force.

These findings suggest that graduate education for management is likely to be more meaningful to women who have work experience. This is especially true in the majority of programs where students have a choice of electives which relate to specific managerial activities. While the desirability of work experience probably also applies to men, it may be more important to women since few have been raised in a home where a role model for a woman manager is present. The fact, however, that an unusually large number of these women have working mothers should be related to their basic career orientation. These findings may also suggest the desirability of increased efforts to expose women who contemplate or are pursuing management education to practicing women managers.

The findings also suggest that organizations will face increasing pressure to consider the personal wants and needs of their management corps in designing career opportunities and requirements. This pressure will increasingly come not only from women themselves but from men who feel the necessity of adjusting to the demands of their wives' careers.

It is highly desirable that more information be collected and disseminated--to both potential and to practicing managers, to both women and men--so that individuals will be better equipped to make both personal and career decisions and so that all types of organizations may obtain maximum benefit from the pool of managerial talent available to them.

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